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ABSTRACT

Because conflict has become a pervasive element within the school environment as well as in the larger community, this review, based on reports abstracted in RIE, focuses on conflict management. Such management seeks and uses ways to understand and deal with the differing opinions, needs, and ideas that are a part of the contemporary school. The documents reviewed discuss such issues as (1) the conflicting perceptions of administrators and teachers, (2) the operational procedures of school boards in relation to community resources, and (3) the interracial conflict in urban schools. (Author)

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Conflict Management in Education

by Philip K. Piele

Conflict has become a pervasive element within the school environment, as well as in the larger community. This review focuses on conflict management—ways to understand and deal with the differing opinions, needs, and ideas that are part of the present-day school. The documents reviewed discuss such issues as the conflicting perceptions of administrators and teachers, school boards and their operational procedures in relation to community resources, and interracial conflict in inner-city schools.

The documents cited were processed by this and other clearinghouses in the ERIC system and were announced in *Research in Education (RIE)*, ERIC's monthly index and abstract catalog. The review is based on the reports' abstracts in *RIE*. Facsimile paper copy reproductions of all but three of the documents are available from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service. Complete instructions for ordering documents are given at the end of the review.

Research Reveals Perceptions of Administrators and Faculty Differ

Seaberg and Liberty[1] sought to determine whether school administrators and teachers in six New Mexico school districts hold differing opinions on the importance of (1) certain areas of school policy formulation and decision-making, (2) school policy areas that should involve teachers, and (3) methods teachers should employ to obtain their goals. Questionnaire results show salient differences in teachers' and administrators' opinions regarding the importance of policies to determine teacher workloads, select instructional materials, evaluate buildings and facilities, arrange extra duties for teachers, and plan staff meetings. Opinions varied on the methods teachers should use to obtain their goals. Disagreement existed over whether teachers should be involved in determining policies governing administrators and staff as well as in establishing practices for professional leave. The report also contains statistical analyses tables and samples of the data collection instrument.

From information collected by mail and interview Niland[2] identifies such areas of administrator-faculty conflict as the perceptions and attitudes of administrators and teachers concerning policy-making. Conditions working for change in the present authority structure include not only the formation of teachers organizations, but also state legislation of funds for instruction and mandatory faculty senates. Niland maintains the administration faces three groups of faculty—activists, generally supportive, and complacent. By working with the middle group the administration can discover the causes of the conflicts and resolve them in a professional manner. Any agreement should include the local faculty organization and provide channels of communication, room for negotiation, and appellate procedures in cases of deadlock.

Cave[3] studied the descriptions of administrators, school boards, and members of teachers unions in ten school districts to test the hypothesis that clashes between school administrators and teachers unions are due largely to the conflicting perceptions of the school administrator's leadership behavior. Respondents of all three groups to a questionnaire defined ideal and real administrators in similar terms on a scale of twelve leader behavior dimensions. Following Halpin's scheme for measuring leader behavior, quadrant analyses indicated that the six leader behavior dimensions contributing most to conflict resolution were consideration, initiation of structure, integration, demand reconciliation, tolerance of freedom, and production emphasis. Cave recommends a study of the applicability of the research model for use in educational administration and an evaluation of procedures for selecting school administrators with respect to each school's organizational climate. Adequate programs for training administrators should be developed, with greater emphasis on the behavioral sciences.

Studies Investigate Conflict Management

A successful conflict manager in the field of education, according to Bailey,[4] is aware of the problems facing the young, the oppressed, and the sensitive and is harshly realistic about his own personal and role limitations. Success also depends on substituting collective judgments for personal discretion, possessing the leadership and organizational ability necessary to deal with crises-type conflicts that have gone beyond rational negotiation, and refusing to become overly discouraged by frequent defeats.

By examining staff conflicts in public schools, Corwin[5] sought to develop instrumentation and measurement procedures for a larger study of conflicts among public educators. He investigated two types of conflicts: friction incidents that have recently occurred between teachers and their administrators, as described by a sample of teachers; and conflicting conceptions of teachers' professional and employee roles as measured by Likert-type status orientation scales. Assuming that professionalism is a militant process by which a vocation attempts to gain control over its work, Corwin developed a questionnaire and interview technique that when applied to a "control" group seemed valid. Results imply further research and the need for more systematic analysis.

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Community Structure Relates to Conflict Propensity

Minar[6] sampled forty-eight suburban Cook County, Illinois, elementary school systems to investigate the relationships among three major variables—community structure, community level or popular decision-making, and institutional decision-making. Data used in the study were votes cast in district board elections and referenda, descriptive information on school systems, and census materials. The study was based on the hypothesis that the American political culture seeks the suppression of conflict. Communities were compared by their differential successes in reaching this goal. Results of the study indicate that the presence in the system of large proportions of people with high incomes, education, and occupations explains aggregate community behavior toward schools. School boards in low conflict-high resource areas usually appear to give their superintendents wide latitudes of initiative and decision, while in high conflict systems board members seem to have more power independent of the superintendent. The kinds of administrative decisions questioned in the various districts also differ, with low conflict areas interested in questions of finance and construction, and high conflict districts raising questions about personnel and minor policy matters. Nominating caucuses and other mediating mechanisms are typically used in low conflict-high resource communities as a major part of the conflict-management system.

Viewing administration as a social process, Lipham and others[7] conducted a three-year study of the role of the school board as an agency for resolving conflict between the school and the community. Role expectations for the school board were assessed by interviewing citizens, teachers, public officials, and school board members in school districts in Wisconsin. Conflict resolution was assessed by observing school boards during the budget adoption process. Analysis indicated that consensus in role expectations for the school board and resolution of the school board role conflict were not related either to change in financial support for the schools, or to change in allocations to selected budget categories. School boards tended to engage in role avoidance, seldom resolved conflict in open meetings, tended to be intraorganizationally oriented on educational issues, and were extraorganizationally oriented on economic issues. Recommendations for future studies include distinguishing between role dissensus and role conflict and giving equal attention to both role and personality determinants of behavior.

School Board's Interaction with Superintendent Reveals Community Traits

To determine the extent to which school system environments may be distinct, Snow[8] analyzed four Illinois suburban communities in terms of community resources and conflict propensity. The voting records, socioeconomic data, and aspects of board of education interaction with school superintendents were also analyzed. A comparison of constraints and supports for the four communities indicated a higher degree of school superintendent leadership in the district with the most resources and conflict management skill. Differential manifestations of superintendent administrative ability and varying degrees of success achieved in school-community relations for the four communities were briefly reviewed.

To test a restructured version of the Simmelian theory of conflict, which holds that conflict can result in conciliation, cooperation, and other benefits, Nussel[9] interviewed fourteen leaders of metropolitan community groups who had been active in five separate conflict situations with the local board of education. The objective of the study was to understand the resultant attitudes of those involved and whether or not the experience was beneficial to them. These findings indicate conflict between the schools and their communities should be avoided because of the dominance of dysfunctional elements. More empirical investigation is needed before it is safe to generalize concerning conflict and its benefits.

Interracial Relations Emerge as Dominant Factor in Conflict

Through the resolution of conflict Chesler and BenDor[10] believe the quality of interracial and intergenerational relations and of education itself can be improved. Some of the major issues are peer support, relations between black and white peer groups, educators' styles, professional roles, and community relations. Resolution techniques include staff and faculty training in race relations, negotiations training for both students and administrators, and acceptance of role reciprocity. Curriculum change, community control, restructuring, and consultant intervention in crises are seen as important steps in resolving conflict.

Sexton[11] suggests the major issue in urban education is class conflict. With polarity of the "haves" and "have-nots," the services the school offers the latter group are limited. The generally moderate stance of most liberal school board members and their insufficient zeal in pressing the grievances of the have-nots are important factors. Sexton sees as further obstructions bureaucratic resistance and the role of conservatives in paring school budgets. This class conflict also permeates congressional and state aid to education. Documentary evidence of conditions in Chicago and New York City schools corroborates the statement that class conflict is reflected in school inequalities and class-biased training. Ethnic roles are also interconnected with class roles. A new and different problem for urban schools is the massive task of racial acculturation. Breakthroughs may possibly come through political pressures, increased civil rights activity, amalgamation of lower-class groups, federal aid programs, and voluntary and private efforts. Increased college opportunities, instructional innovations, unionization of teachers, and decentralization may also improve the educational quality of urban schools.

Goldhammer and others[12] discuss the findings of a project designed to identify and evaluate strategies employed by school administrators in dealing with conflicts arising from the diverse and opposing values held by different groups within a community. Chosen as the site for the case study was a city school district that had been involved in a conflict situation caused by racial imbalance in its schools. Data were collected from newspaper accounts, personal interviews, questionnaires, and recorded documents in the files of the school district. This study offers a comprehensive reconstruction of

the actions and events relevant to the resolution of a community conflict over racial imbalance in the schools.

Effective Communication Resolves Conflict

Peck and Miller[13] studied resolution of conflict between students and teachers in an inner-city school. Their goals were to establish effective communication between these groups and to improve understanding so that mutual problems could be resolved. The results of the study indicate: effective communication was established through use of a tape recording exchange procedure; levels of agreement and understanding between students and teachers were initially high and remained high throughout the investigation; and the basis for existing disagreement was identified in terms of differential cue weighting. The authors maintain that the ability to identify the precise basis of the existing disagreement led to the implementation of a program that substantially improved relations between students and teachers in this particular setting.

Through interviews and discussions with students Chesler[14] studied the nature of student-school conflict in several crisis-torn secondary schools. Widely repeated complaints maintained that high school curriculum was not geared to the needs of the non-college-bound student. Grievances were expressed over the traditional character of classroom instruction that included exacting control over a student's behavior. Racism in secondary schools and the schools' apparent disregard for other social problems including the draft, poverty, and political power inequities have also been attacked by students. Chesler advocates that teachers and administrators give immediate and constant attention to a reformation of the schools that will alter these conditions. One solution proposes a student-faculty government to establish grievance procedures and to stimulate dialogue. The hiring of competent instructors and the development of public accountability of school systems would also be instrumental steps toward harmony.

Theories Investigate Solutions to Conflict

Ziller[15] describes a social psychological theory of self-other orientation as it relates to interpersonal conflict and aggression. It is assumed that the reduction of self-esteem and social interest creates conflict that develops into aggression. The result is development of an unchanging self-centered theory of behavior. Principles of conflict control are discussed in relation to group characteristics (open-closed groups, presence of a third person, problem-solving norms, and power differential between members), communication processes (formal-informal communication, verbal-nonverbal communication, and timing), and the complexity of task demands.

Two laboratory experiments by Ziller[16] describe the effects of the presence of a neutral in a communication network during the resolution of opinion differences between two persons. The presence of a neutral was found to be associated with increased resistance to persuasion, increased number of messages between parties, and increased awareness of difficulty in resolving the conflict. It is proposed that the neutral sustains conflict by prematurely rendering public the positions of the parties involved. Member tenure and power were found to be positively associated, suggesting that open groups—in contrast to closed groups—more readily incur conflict.

Johnson[17] investigated the efficacy of role reversal, used in conflict situations to reduce distortions in perceptions of the opponent's position and to increase understanding of the opponent's position. Role reversal for clarifying communication during negotiations and for inducing cooperative behavior in conflict situations was also investigated. The variables manipulated in the experiment were warmth of interaction, accuracy of understanding, and proposal of compromises. A two-phase intergroup competition procedure was used with 128 volunteers from a small liberal arts college. Results supported the following hypotheses: that accuracy of understanding of the opponent's position was related to the number of agreements reached in negotiations; that warmth of interaction facilitates negotiations, but not opponent's attitude change; and that proposal of compromises lends more readily to agreements.

Vantine's[18] negotiation theory involves pure, mixed, and mutual accommodation bargaining. The formulation draws on concepts used in game theory, labor negotiations, and conflict-resolution theories. He develops a changing utility model that can be used to plot changes in disposition and record payoffs that accrue as a result of bargaining issues. He tested the formulation in a case study of negotiations. The findings of the study may be used to expand bargaining theory and to provide insights into the collective negotiations process.

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Directory of Organizations and Personnel in Educational Management, third edition, 1971-1972, by Philip K. Piele and Stuart C. Smith. Compiled as a tool for locating information about research in educational management, the directory has been expanded both in the scope of its subject areas and in the number of organizations and researchers listed. The new edition, with increased coverage of research on educational facilities, lists 154 organizations and 416 individuals, more than double the total number of entries in the previous edition.

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The price is $3.00 per copy. Checks should be made payable to the Institute for Community Studies, U of O.

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